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ABSTRACT

In a study of the revision strategies used by skilled and basic (unskilled) writers, 50 students assigned to an experimental group wrote an expository essay, then rewrote their compositions from memory. A control group of 20 students was given the same assignment, but the students were allowed access to their first drafts. As expected, the control group displayed little evidence of revision, while the experimental group produced pairs of essays that presented from 10% to 100% differences in content. Within the experimental group, the skilled and unskilled writers showed such marked differences that they appeared to be involved in different experiments: the basic writers demonstrated a consistent tendency to regard the second writing task as divorced from the first essay, while the skilled writers demonstrated a distinct awareness of the relationship between their two essays. On the other hand, the unskilled writers in the experimental group showed more improvement in their second drafts than did their counterparts in the control group, an indication that basic writers are not incapable of extensive, productive revisions, though the distracting presence of rough notes and first drafts simply impedes their revising processes. Based on these results, a three-phase procedure of revising from memory, comparing drafts, and synthesizing dissonant ideas was proposed to help student writers develop a pattern of revision. (RL)

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RE: REVISION--AN ANALYSIS OF THE REVISION STRATEGIES OF COLLEGE WRITERS

A paper for CCCC,
Dallas, Texas, 1981

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Five years have passed since Mina Shaughnessy first offered the following sketch of our profession:

> We lack a tradition of collaborative research, within colleges as well as among them, that would enable us to combine resources and conduct more systematic experiments. Nowhere in the profession of teaching writing is the frontier more wide open.[1]

Pioneer research has only recently addressed itself to the problematic terrain of the composing process. Part of the problem involves understanding the landscape; we must familiarize ourselves with our surroundings, yet not become so familiar that we overlook rather than perceive. Consider the current attention being directed toward a reëvaluation of the revision process. Up until the last few years, our notion of revision suffered from a presumed familiarity with composing process. Instead of looking at how writers actually revise, writing teachers, Composition Handbook authors, and most researchers regarded revision as "a separate stage at the end of the process--a stage that comes after the completion of a first or second draft and one that is temporally distinct from the prewriting and

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writing stages of the process."[2] The pedagogical implications of such a linear model are, I think, predictable: distinctions between revising and editing dissolve. Teachers emphasize the necessity of correcting errors; indeed, student papers are meticulously corrected and returned to their authors, who, in turn, are told to "rewrite the essay, correcting all necessary mistakes."

It is debatable whether students learn anything useful from this cycle of writing and rewriting. No doubt the student writers are made keenly aware of their inadequacies--but then, by the time they reach university, these students (especially the basic writers) already know their limitations. Some of the students will respond positively; they will learn to proof-read effectively--but these students are probably already proficient writers. Their unskilled counterparts seldom benefit from localized corrections. As Flanigan and Menendez maintain, "learners often bind knowledge so closely to its original context or activity that they cannot generalize the knowledge and adapt it to new activities, new contexts."[3] Even such elementary "revision" as proof-reading is inhibited by a closed set of writing behaviors, each set peculiar to, and dependent upon, the particular writing activity. Not a strategy (a choice of operations to be attempted), but a behavior describes each student's reaction to a learned rhetorical situation--each student's inability to adapt rules to new contexts reflects a conditioned response

to the passive cycle of correction and recopying inculcated by the traditional classroom experience.

But what is the alternative? How do we revise our notion of the revision process?

First, I suggest, we can take Mina Shaughnessy's advice and "conduct...systematic experiments": we can take a second look at revision by examining its role in a representative cross-section of student writing; we can compare the revision behaviors of basic writers with those of skilled writers; and we can stop viewing the revision process through the filter of a linear composing model that is only incidentally related to the reflexive mix of prewriting, writing, and revision activities that actually occurs.

At the risk of anticipating my own observations, let me offer one more speculative note of introduction as a prelude to a more objective, more "systematic" analysis of revision: Once basic writers' words are on the paper, the writers' inefficient revising behaviors trap them into a maze of concerns that seem, if not inimical to, at least removed from, their initial rhetorical inspiration. The essays become closed systems, fixed and inviolable. Susan Warters' research into the composing process of college basic writers confirms my own introductory observations and graphically emphasizes the extent to which this particular form of <u>closure</u>[4] manifests itself:

> No student ever rejected, transposed,
> or substantially altered the first

> sentence which he wrote.... Even though the first sentence at times locked a writer into a pattern which was difficult to develop, or inappropriate to his purpose, he still retained the sentence and simply ignored the implications.[5]

But rather than rehearse hearsay evidence, I wish now to detail the results of a research project designed to offer further definition to the notion of "closure" and its relationship to the revision activities of first year university students.

One way of testing the influence of closure is to interfere with the student's normal revision activity. By asking students to "revise" an essay without the benefit of either their first drafts or their rough notes, I hoped to free the student writers (especially the unskilled writers) from the constraint of their own written words, from the tyranny of their first drafts. Accordingly, I secured a random sample of 70 first-year students from the University of British Columbia: 50 students formed the experimental group, and 20 students formed the control.[6] Although the subjects were told that they were participating in a campus-wide experiment, they were asked to consider the writing task as a normal assignment--the assignment was graded and recorded as part of their regular course work.

Each student in the experimental group was asked to read a 500-word extract from a typical example of contemporary journalism.[7] The instructions read:

> In her report on "Teen Sex"(Maclean's, 1980), Judith Timson makes a number of provocative observations, yet she offers no clear evaluation of either teen sexuality or contemporary sex education. Write an essay that does evaluate the social and moral implications of both teen sexuality and sex education.
>
> When you write your essay, pretend that it will be read by another first-year university student who has not read Timson's report.
>
> Feel free to think about the question as long as you like before you begin writing; but, once you start your paper, try not to spend more than 1 hour writing your essay.
>
> SEAL ALL MATERIAL (ROUGH NOTES AND FINISHED ESSAY) IN THE ENVELOPE PROVIDED BEFORE PROCEEDING DIRECTLY TO PART II.

The Part Two assignment provided the students with a new copy of the extract and asked them to offer a revision (from memory) of the essay written for Part One. And again they were asked not to spend more than one hour writing the paper.

The instructions given to the control group directed them to complete the same two assignments; but, unlike their counterparts, they were allowed access to their first drafts. And, once the results had been tabulated, 20 students were chosen for a series of post-experiment interviews.

I should note at this point that the experiment was designed as a home project. Though I was sacrificing a large measure of control, I was dubious about the appropriateness of eliciting in-class writing as a genuine representation of typical composing activities. As Freedman and Pringle note in a recent article on composition process, "Writing done

in...a controlled context implies a composing process that is radically different from the process each of us undergoes in the course of our normal writing.... And surely the differences in the process have implications for the product."[8] Since the intent of my own experiment was to free the students from unnecessary constraints, the "closed" experimental setting threatened to impose an unwanted interference.

Once coded and randomly shuffled, the essays were graded by three markers who scored each draft according to a 9 point scale derived from the holistic evaluation procedures outlined in Cooper and Odell's Evaluating Writing.[9] The markers achieved an initial reliability coefficient of .76--by feeding each discrepancy back into the stack of unmarked papers, the coefficient was revised to .87. Finally, once the markers had finished grading (and regrading), the remaining disagreements were drawn to their attention, discussed, and awarded compromise grades.[10]

Striking differences appeared between the groups of writers. As expected, the control group displayed little evidence of revision: changes (generally deletions and substitutions) between the two drafts were largely confined to the lexical and sentence level--only the most proficient writers rearranged or added larger idea clusters. Indeed, with relatively few exceptions, the control group offered little more than edited photocopies of their first drafts. In sharp contrast, the experimental group produced pairs of

essays that presented from 10% to 100% content difference. Now it is not surprising that a writer revising from memory should produce a substantially "different" second draft. We would anticipate all writers (skilled and unskilled) to produce changes in syntax, diction and arrangement; yet, so different was the character of their essay pairs that a cursory glance at the results might suggest that the unskilled writers and the skilled writers were participating in different experiments.

The basic writers demonstrated a consistent tendency to regard the Part Two assignment as a task divorced from the Part One essay. Instead of presenting an opportunity to develop and refine their arguments, Part Two of the experiment presented the unskilled writers with a somewhat easier assignment only tangentially related to the first. Most of these students either rehearsed one or two notions from their original drafts and used them as a bridge to a basically autonomous second draft, or they composed a new essay and arbitrarily attached the "conclusion" from essay #1. However, in spite of their inherent limitations, these second drafts did tend to engage the topic in a slightly more committed manner--but let me suspend my comments on this point until I have completed my comparative analysis.

The skilled writers demonstrated a distinct awareness of the relationship between their two essays. For these writers, Part Two was regarded as a clear opportunity to revise and to improve. Consider the comments expressed by Vickie, a proficient student writer:

> Part One was not very well organized; however, it prepared a basic outline for me to follow in Part Two. So Part Two was much easier to complete since I still remembered fragments of the essay I wrote in Part One.

A detailed context analysis of each student's pair of essays gave further definition to the difference between the skilled and unskilled writers of the experimental group.

By itemizing discrete semantic units (nouns, or nouns plus modifiers, or personal pronouns) from each of the students' two drafts, I established a measure of referential content. Each semantic unit was counted as 1 idea cluster; then, once the list for each draft had been compared with its mate, common idea clusters were identified and subtracted from the total number of different ideas generated by both drafts. I found that the unskilled writers averaged a 71% content difference between drafts, while the skilled writers produced second drafts that were an average of only 28% different in content.

One basic writer offered the following explanation for such a wide content variation:

> I found the composition of Part Two easier to write because ideas just kept coming into my head. In Part One--I had to use more thought in my first essay.

When pressed to explain why she had refrained from either repeating or enlarging upon her earlier ideas, the student

answered (in a decidedly brusque tone) that "the [first] essay was finished." For this student, and for the other unskilled writers, an a priori sense of closure seemingly precluded the possibility of productive revision. I do not doubt their sincerity, but I think it naïve to simply accept the basic writers' assertions that they did not "feel like" repeating themselves in their second drafts. Composing processes are never reducible to simple expressions of intent.

Once the first word is put on paper, the writer establishes a functional dialectic, a retrospective interaction that necessarily influences the direction, the form, and the meaning of the author's original intent. E.M. Forster says of his own revision process, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Forster discovers meaning by reacting to the form of the words on the page. James Britton notes an embryonic pattern of discovery through form in the writing of small children:

> children's writing sometimes demonstrates (a) "taking over" process in the course of a single utterance. A piece that begins in a loose, unstructured way--perfunctorily, even--may seem to take shape under the influence of the affective power of a rhythm or a sound pattern, an image or an idea.[11]

Ironically, it is a version of this "taking over" process that, far from liberating the revision activities of the college basic writer, locks the student into a repetitive cycle of writing and recopying--a parody of the exploratory revision

process articulated by E.M. Forster.

In terms of a revision "strategy", the basic writer typically tries to act as if revision were a discrete and separable part of the composing process; yet, from an objective point of view, we see the writer react constantly while composing (and react in a predictable pattern). Sondra Perl explains:

> [The editing of basic writers] intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing.... The students are prematurely concerned with the "look" of their writing; thus, as soon as a few words are written on the paper, detection and correction of errors replaces writing and revising. (italics mine) [12]

Perl's implied distinction between editing and revising helps to clarify a central dilemma faced by the basic writer: as if plagued by an unreachable itch or an unresolved sneeze, the basic writer becomes engaged in a futile and thus debilitating preoccupation; the preoccupation with textual dissonance dominates attention, disrupts the flow of discourse, and precludes successful communication.

At least part of the problem then involves the basic writer's concept of rules: instead of enhancing the writer's communicative efforts, the conventions of written English seem to produce a proactive inhibition, a level of interference that impedes composition. All of the unskilled students interviewed in the present study suggested, to varying degrees, that they felt inhibited by the rules of punctuation,

grammar, and spelling. Listen to these three basic writers:

> I tend to make a lot of errors as I'm going along, but I also correct them as I go along. Like I won't go more than a paragraph without re-reading what I have written.
>
> The thing I really get muffled on is placing commas in certain areas. I try placing commas in different places to see how they work out.
>
> Spelling is the big problem. Sometimes I'm so busy worrying about them, I forget what I'm writing about and I have to go back and figure it out.

Now compare the following excerpts from my interviews with some of the more proficient writers:

> When I'm writing I'll trust my basic idea.... Then later, usually, if I just re-read once, I just want to change grammatical errors, spelling mistakes.
>
> I'll make some changes as I go along, but I'll wait until I've finished a page or the whole essay because then you notice more errors, and you notice something's not making very much sense, or it's not quite saying what you want it to say.
>
> I haven't been criticized too much for my grammar, so I don't really have to worry about it when I'm writing.

The skilled writers' remarks strike an unmistakable chorus of self-confidence, a refrain unshared by their less skilled counterparts, who have been "criticized too much for [their] grammar."

It would be reductive to blame the current literacy crisis on the revision policies common to most high school and university classrooms. But my observations and student interviews suggest that teaching revision methods (editing and recopying) based upon a traditional linear model of the revision process confuses and alienates unskilled writers.

As a way of laying the foundation necessary for a more appropriate pedagogical approach, let me return to my sample of student writers. I cannot claim that revision alone determined the relative success or failure of each set of compositions, but an ability to see beyond the demands of editing clearly complemented superior writing ability. For the skilled writer, it is a matter of overlooking in order to revise; as Nancy Sommers says in her analysis of 20 skilled adult writers, "experienced writers...seek to discover (to create) meaning in the engagement with their writing, in revision.... The experienced writers...get closer to their meaning by not limiting themselves too early to lexical concerns."[13] Ironically, the unskilled writers in my study did overlook--not while composing their first drafts, but while rereading <u>after</u> the first drafts were "completed". As one student told me,

> I'm not aware when I read the essay (when I reread it); I'm so engrossed with what I'm saying because I know exactly what I'm saying.... I don't really look at it as if its a piece of paper with words and punctuation, I look at it as the ideas, so I don't really see.

"Rereading" here is very different from the reading that occurs during the act of composing, for here rereading occurs under the illusion of premature closure. Once the text is viewed by its author as "finished", revision (re-seeing) becomes a perceptual problem.

David Bartholomae, in his lucid and sensitive study of student error, argues that rereading "frees a writer from the constraints of transcription, which for many basic writers is an awkward, laborious process, putting excessive demands on both patience and short-term memory."[14] During the physical act of writing, reading the actual words on the page, the units of expression, locks student writers into confusing and inappropriate patterns; when reread after the text is "closed", however, these same words lose their imprisoning power and, quite literally, are interpreted by their authors as acceptable gestures of the writers' intended meanings. Thus, when it comes to developing useful revision strategies, basic writers face a shared, debilitating dilemma: they can't revise what they can't see.

Apparently, while composing, unskilled writers invest a wealth of meaning in an ostensibly bankrupt system of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. But when the writer rereads his own "finished" composition, this private system gains sudden currency as an acceptable carrier of intended meaning. The conventions of written discourse, the same conventions that impede and constrain the composing processes of unskilled writers, become incidental to the perception of meaning.

The writers become readers "of content rather than form;"[15] formal closure gives way to unrestricted disclosure. What these unskilled writers seem to lack is an ability to regard their composition as a shared space open to both writer and reader, for successful revision depends upon open communication between the writer as writer and the writer as reader of his own text.

It is not surprising, then, that only the skilled writers in my control group benefitted from the consultation of their first drafts: their ideas were clearly more reworked than those of the unskilled writers. On the other hand--and this is a most intriguing statistic--, while the unskilled writers in general neither evidenced nor articulated any attitude that might be called a revision strategy, the second drafts of those in the experimental group showed (on average) a 1.25 scale point improvement over their control group counterparts--in the control group, the average scores for first and second drafts were 4 and 3.75, respectively; in the experimental group, the average scores were 3.5 and 4.5. In other words, these basic writers wrote more coherent, better organized, and generally more focussed papers when they revised from memory.

Basic writers, then, are not incapable of extensive and productive revision: the distracting presence of rough notes and first drafts simply impedes the revising process. True, when the formal influence is artificially removed, these writers only become embroiled in yet another set of formal preoccupations;

but their sudden freedom to discard ideas does suggest latent revising potential--and here I mean revising, not editing. Their "freedom" is illusory, of course; but the illusion of composing freedom is itself instructive. Not only does it allow basic writers to move more easily in their shared linguistic harness (grades for second drafts were higher), it gives the writers some feeling for the revision process. Once the possibility of re-seeing the topic is recognized (and experienced), students, especially those students who habitually claim that their first drafts express all they can on the topic, are confronted by the striking content difference between their first efforts and their second drafts revised from memory. More importantly, the act of comparing the two drafts distances writers from their products. And if, in turn, unskilled writers are asked to synthesize their two drafts, they experience a rhetorical distance approximating that of their more skilled counterparts; that is, the basic writers experience both the freedom to generate ideas and the freedom to assess how those ideas relate or clash with one another. In essence, the three-phase procedure (revising from memory, comparing drafts, and synthesizing dissonant ideas) allows the basic writers to experience and to practice a pattern of revision that is drawn from the revision processes of proficient writers.

In addition to freeing basic writers from the tyranny of their first drafts (from their sense of premature closure),

the three-phase procedure encourages the development of productive revision strategies, strategies that view low-level formal activities as concerns secondary to the development, the organization, and the refinement of ideas.

Variations of this procedure can be profitably adapted to the various skill-levels of our student writers. A slightly more advanced writer, for example, might be encouraged to conflate the three phases and substitute some form of inter-draft outlining. Perl and Egendorf refer to this strategy in terms of "projective structuring":

> Reversing the traditional sequence, so that "outlining" follows rather than precedes initial writing, has several advantages: it frees students from the expectation that their initial writing must conform to some logical, a priori scheme; it helps "pry" them loose from the words on the page by asking them to clarify further the sense that those formulations are intended to capture; it enables them to see more clearly where something is lacking.[16]

Instead of locking themselves into rigid prewriting routines, students of average writing ability can use traditional "outlining" procedures as part of their revision strategy, as a way of re-seeing and reordering the ideas generated by their "rehearsal drafts".

More proficient writers (those already conversant with strategies to deal with form) should concern themselves with the larger formal constrains of audience--they should expand their focus from form to performance. For, in the final

analysis, it is only by measuring their intentions against the demands of a rhetorical context that student writers can move from a limited (and limiting) egocentric posture to what Wayne Booth has called "the rhetorical stance." Such a secure sense of balance, however, is not simply assumed. Skilled writing may be admired from a distance, but it is only learned through first-hand experience of the process that produces it. Though often overlooked, revision is, I would argue, the key composing principle of that process.

Notes

[1]Mina Shaughnessy, "Basic Writing," Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate(Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 147.

[2]Nancy Sommers,"Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," CCC, 31(December, 1980). 378.

[3]Micheal C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez, "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," College English, 42(November, 1980), 265. The revision guidelines presented in this article complement the findings of my own study and offer a program of revision procedures appropriate to the student writer of average or above average ability.

[4]In this paper I will be using the term "closure" to describe three related concepts: the archaic meaning of closure (the condition of being confined in an enclosed space), the current lexical and literary meaning (the sense of an ending), and the specialized psychological meaning (the perception of incomplete forms as though complete by compensating for the missing parts).

The literary concept has been carefully defined by a number of literary critics. See especially, Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending; Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968). In the field of psychology, the concept of closure was first treated (by the Gestalt school) as a tendency to prefer closed organizations of stimuli to open organizations. Later theorists refined the concept and restated it as the tendency for certain incomplete or unclosed forms to be perceived as complete or closed. For an excellent discussion of the uses of the term in psychology, see Joseph M. Bobbitt, "An Experimental Study of the Phenomenon of Closure as a Threshold Function," Journal of Expermental Psychology, 30 (April, 1941), 273-294.

In the present essay, it is my purpose to show how these three related notions of closure influence revision at various phases of the composing process.

[5]Susan Warters, "The Writing Process of College Basic Writers," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, May, 1979.

[6]To eliminate the possible influence of dialect interference, this study sought to secure a sample of writers whose first language was English; thus 100 assignments were handed out and the first 70 responses to satisfy the language criterion were randomly sorted into two groups: the experimental group and the control.

[7]Judith Timson, "Teen Sex," Macleans's (March, 1980), 39.

[8]Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle, "Writing in the College Years: Some Indices of Growth," CCC, 31(October, 1980), 312.

[9]In particular see, Charles Cooper, "Holistic Evaluation of Writing," Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, eds. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell(Urbana, Ill.,: NCTE, 1977), pp. 3-32.

[10]Since most of the grading differences involved those papers scoring 5-6 on the 9 point scale, reliability ratings for the unskilled and skilled groups were much higher: the unrevised coefficient for the 1-4 basic writing group was .92; the unrevised coefficient for the 7-9 skilled writing group was .88.

[11]James Britton, "The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing," Research on Composing, eds. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell(Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), p. 25.

[12]Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 13(December, 1979), 333.

[13]Sommers, "Revision Strategies," 386.

[14]David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," CCC, 31(October, 1980), 267. Bartholomae offers both a scholarly evaluation of the reading behaviors of unskilled writers and a speculative strategy for correcting such reading-related problems.

[15]Perl, "The Composing Processes," 326.

[16]Sondra Perl and Arthur Egendorf, "The Process of Creative Discovery: Theory, Research, and Implications for Teaching," Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron: University of Akron Press, 1979), p. 131. And for a similar treatment of the same subject see, Richard M. Coe, "Teaching Revision: Concepts, Heuristics, and Techniques," paper presented at the CCCC Conference, Dallas, Texas, March, 1981.